Chapter 3

Theory: An Ethical Epistemology of Publicly Engaged Biocultural Research

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The approach taken to the organization and interpretation of data from the African Burial Ground (ABG) involves four main elements. The ways in which these elements have guided the research are discussed this chapter. These theoretic principles can be generalized and extended to a broader range of research projects than our study of the New York African Burial Ground (NYABG).

1. While seeking sociocultural and ideological influences of research, critical theory in the vindicationist vein allows the interpretations to be scrutinized, empowering factual information through scientific and other scholarly research. The fundamental principle rests upon acknowledging that political and ideological implications are intrinsic to science and history, and that choices about these are unavoidable (Douglass 1950 [1854]; Blakey 1996, 1998b). The pervasive incorporation of African diasporic intellectual traditions of this kind into the dialog around New York's ABG opened a special opportunity for applying this long-standing critical view of historical knowledge to a bioarchaeological study. Many brands of "critical theory" have emerged in recent decades including neo-Marxist and postmodernist thought in American and European archaeology. The synthesis of criticism that emerges in this case was referenced previously (Chapter 2) as part of the evolved understandings of the social and political embeddedness of history and anthropology among African diasporans. Yet as

participants in the intellectual development of a broader 'Western' world, such critical thought connects with other intellectual traditions whose experience has led to similar insights.

2. Public engagement affords the communities most affected by a research program a key role in the design and use of research results. A respect for pluralism and the ethics of working with groups of people who historically were placed at risk of social and psychological harm recommends an acknowledgement of this community's right to participate in research decisions. Scholars balance accountability to such communities with responsibility to standards of evidential proof or plausibility that defines the role of scholars. The goal of this collaboration is not simply ethical: Public engagement affords opportunities for advancing knowledge and its societal significance by drawing upon broader societal ideas and interests. The democratization of knowledge involved here is not predicated on the inclusion of random voices, but on democratic pluralism that allows for a critical mass of ideas and interests to be developed for a bioarchaeological site or other research project, predicated on the ethical rights of descendant or culturally affiliated communities to determine their own well-being.

3. Multiple data sets facilitate cross-validation of the plausibility of results. Results may be rejected, accepted, or recombined into newly plausible narratives about the past based on how diverse results of different methods compete or reconfigure as a complex whole. The required multidisciplinary experts engage in a 'conversation' that produces interdisciplinary interpretations of the archaeological population or sample. Diverse expertise provides for recognition of a subject matter that might otherwise go

unnoticed in the individuals and communities under study. By revealing multiple dimensions of human subjects, this approach can characterize even skeletal individuals that more nearly resemble the complexities of human experience than are possible in simple, reductionist descriptions.

4. An African diasporic frame of reference for the New York population provides a connection both to an Atlantic world political economy and a transatlantic cultural history that is more reflective of the causal conditions existing throughout the life cycle of members of this eighteenth century community, than was the local Manhattan context of enslavement. The broader diasporic context of their lives also adds to an understanding of the population as more fully human than is afforded by a local context of enslavement. Non-African diasporic research might also circumscribe, differently, the scope of time and space required to examine a sufficiently large political economic system and social history to begin to explain how, what, and why its subject came to be.

Critical Theory

African diasporic intellectuals have, since late slavery, acknowledged the intrinsically political implications of anthropology and history with which they were confronted. Indeed, the historical record of American physical anthropology has continued to demonstrate that the physical anthropologists with the most emphatic interest in "objectivity" have nonetheless participated in the creation of racial and racist ideology (Blakey 1987, 1996; Rankin-Hill and Blakey1994; Gould 1981). The previous chapter has shown how even highly descriptive studies can represent political ideology. White supremacist notions are supported when representations of blacks are so shallow

and biological as to denude them of human characteristics and motivations. As racialized 'black slaves,' African diasporic populations may be removed from culture and history, an objectification that some view as consistent with the ideals of Western science. Here it is both the biological categorization of identity (race) and the omission of history and culture that deny humanity to these historic populations. While this process dehumanizes the black past, Euro-American history is also transformed to one in which Africans are not recognizable as people. They become instead a category of labor, the instruments or "portmanteau organisms" of whites (see Crosby 1986), that are therefore not readily identified with as the subjects of human rights abuses. These aspects, even of description, transform American history.

Douglass asks scholars to simultaneously take sides *and* be fair to the evidence (Douglass 1950 [1854]). This contrasts with differences from Enlightenment notions of objectivity because it is accepted that science and history will always be subjective, influenced by current biases and interests. How can one take a position and be fair to the evidence? One conceptualization of the purpose of historical research that may not violate either of these goals is the assumption that research into the diasporic past is not simply the pursuit of new knowledge. Indeed, diasporic traditions of critical scholarship have assumed that the search is for the re-evaluation of old, politically distorted and conveniently neglected knowledge about black history. The research design of the African Burial Ground (ABG) project asserts that the motivation to correct these distortions and omissions will drive the research effort in part. This understanding of the ideological nature of the constructed history allows our team to scrutinize data more critically than were the research team to assume ownership of special tools for neutral

knowledge. We need be more circumspect and aware of how our interpretations may be used and influenced by societal interests beyond the academy walls. In the tradition of vindicationism and activist scholarship, our criticism holds as an assumed goal the societally useful rectification of a systematically obscured African-American past. The fact that NYABG should not have existed from the standpoint of the basic education of most Americans supports the need for a vindicationist approach. The history of the northern colonies and of New York is characterized as free and largely devoid of blacks. That of course is untrue. The history that denies the presence of blacks and of slavery in places where these actually did most certainly exist is not accidental. Such a history must be deliberately debated. Yet societal interests also influence our alternative interpretations, and they may influence policy and social action. We are tinkering with other people's identities. Who are we as individual scientists to decide how to formulate our research plans relative to such potentially powerful societal effects?

Public Engagement

While we are responsible for our epistemological choices, it is perhaps inappropriate for researchers to make those choices in isolation. The epistemological choices – i.e. the choice of ways of knowing the past by virtue of the selection of research questions, theories and analytical categories – are also the justifiable responsibility of the broader communities whose lives are most affected by the outcome of research. This recognition of the potential for a democratization of knowledge merges epistemological concerns with ethical ones. The community with which we work – living descendants or culturally-affiliated groups – has an ethical right to be protected from harm resulting from the conduct of research (the American Anthropological Association's Statement on

Professional Responsibility and Ethics, World Archaeological Congress's Ethical Statement, and the new ethical principle of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, which largely recapitulates the former, are key examples of this ethical standard). Community members have a stake in how research is conducted if it might impact them negatively or positively. The National Historic Preservation Act allows the public a say in whether research will be done at all and NAGPRA legislation gives Federally-recognized Native Americans and Pacific Islanders rights to determine the disposition of their ancestral remains and sacred objects.

Many archaeologists and physical anthropologists have resisted these ethical and legal obligations, arguing that the autonomous authority of researchers needs to be protected for the sake of objectivity and the proper, expert stewardship of knowledge about our past. That position is based on assumptions that are inconsistent with our critical theoretical observations of intrinsic cultural embeddedness of science that have informed the activist scholarship in the diaspora. If science is subjective to social interests, it seems fair, at least, in the American cultural ethos, to democratize the choice of those interests that scientists will pursue. Since the people most affected are also to be protected, it is least patronizing for anthropologists to enter into a research relationship with descendant communities by which those communities protect themselves by participating in the decisions regarding research design. Indeed, a "publicly-engaged" anthropology of this kind has been proposed by a panel of leading anthropologists who have linked the practice to American values of democratic participation and pluralism (Forman 1994 and Blakey et al. in Forman 1994). Useful and exciting paths of inquiry, as well as elevated scrutiny of evidential proof, are revealed when naïve objectivity is

replaced by ethics. It is very interesting to consider that the idea of objective methods capable of revealing universal truths may have served to obscure the need for ethics of accountability to non-scientific considerations in the pursuit of knowledge.

Our project has conceived of two types of clients, the descendant community most affected by our research (the ethical client) and the GSA that funds the research (the business client). While both clients have rights that should be protected, the ethical requirements of the field privilege the voices of descendants. Descendants have the right to refuse research entirely, and the researcher's obligation is to share what is known about the potential value of bioarchaeological studies. Our project received permission to present a draft research design to African Americans and others interested in the site. Our purpose was to elicit comment, criticism, new ideas, and questions that the descendant community was most interested in having answers. The result of this public vetting process is, we believe, a stronger research design with more interesting questions than would have likely come from researchers alone. A sense of community empowerment, in contrast to the pre-existing sense of desecration, was fostered by our collaboration. Permission to conduct research according to the resulting design was granted by both clients. Public pressure in support of a more comprehensive research scope than usually afforded such projects resulted from the fact that research questions interested them and that they claimed some ownership of the project. Thus, research directions, an epistemological concern, were fostered by public involvement, an ethical concern. The queries produced by the engagement process were condensed to four major research topics:

1. The cultural background and origins of the population.

2. The cultural and biological transformations from African to African-American identities.

3. The quality of life brought about by enslavement in the Americas.

4. The modes of resistance to slavery.

In applying this approach to an ethical epistemology, experience has shown that social conflict is an inherent possibility of public engagement, as are bonds of common meaning and interest between scholars and the public that would not otherwise have been possible. In 1993, while vetting the Research Design in a Harlem State Government auditorium the panel of researchers was confronted by some African Americans who objected to our references to slavery in Africa, insisting that slavery had never existed there. We were able to convey familiarity with what we considered to be a reflection of the concern of some African-Americans that the Euro-American community's frequent references to African slavery were often meant to suggest that Africans were responsible for the slave trade. That apologetic spin abdicates the responsibility of Europeans and Euro-Americans (the 'demand' side of the trade) for American slavery. We were also sensitive to the frequent misconception that those brought to the Americas were "slaves" in Africa, rather than free people who had been captured and "enslaved." With recognition of this understanding and of differences and similarities between chattel and African household slavery, our requirement as scholars was, nonetheless, to indicate that we would refer to slavery in Africa because of the material evidence for its existence there. It was the community's right to decide whether or not it would engage scholars to conduct research on the ABG or to have only religious practitioners or some other

treatment. If we were to be involved, it was to be as scholars and that meant standing on evidence. It is significant too that the diasporic scholars on the panel knew the critique that had informed the community concern about African slavery and understood it to be more than a matter of emotional sensitivity. They responded that we would attempt to maintain an awareness of the misuses of the fact of slavery in Africa in the course of our work, which we did.

The researchers were strongly urged to refer to the Africans of colonial New York as "Africans" or "enslaved Africans," rather than slaves. This recommendation upon deliberation and discussion seemed cogent and not inconsistent with material facts. The critical consideration of the community representatives was that "slave" was the objectified role that Europeans and American whites had sought to impose. The Africans themselves, while clearly subject in large part to the conditions of the role of "slave" had often both previous experience and self concepts that were as complex human beings "who had their own culture before they came here" as community activist and artist Adunni Tabasi puts it (New York Beacon, August 23, 1995), and who resisted slavery psychologically, politically, and militarily according to material facts. Thus, we agreed that we represented the perspectives of slaveholders by using the dehumanizing definition of the people we were to study as slaves, when "enslaved African" reasonably emphasized the deliberate imposition of a condition upon a people with a culture. Similarly, we accepted, as did the state and Federal agencies, the naming of the "Negroes Burying Ground" the African Burial Ground for similar reasons to the use of "enslaved Africans." Sherrill Wilson found, in the course of background research for the National Historic Landmarks designation of the site, that Africans named their institutions

"African" in New York City as soon as they obtained the freedom to put such nomenclature on record in the early nineteenth century.

This case exemplifies the value of the process of public engagement and the deliberation, potential conflict, and reasonable compromise that was often involved in this process. The purpose was to find a synthesis of scholarship and community interests, if a synthesis could be achieved. Such deliberations rely upon trust, and that is as well established by a demonstration of the integrity of scholarship as it is by the researcher's recognition of the community's ultimate right to determine the disposition of its ancestral remains.

Choice of language was one of the most emphatic contributions of the community that did not seem as comfortable with questioning some of the methodological techniques that were under consideration for study of the remains from the ABG. Invasive methods were discussed and accepted as required to answer the important question of origins that has long been keenly important to African Americans. Family roots and branches had been deliberately severed by the economic expediencies and psychological control methods of slavery. Another community emphasis of importance to the course of the research project was the insistence on including African and Caribbean research in our geographical and cultural scope and on extending the temporal parameters back to the Dutch period when, despite the lack of historical reference, the cemetery might have been used for the burial of Africans and their descendents. These ideas helped to define the project's research questions and choice of expertise that expanded to an African and diasporic scope, which has proved to be essential for recognizing the specific artifactual, genetic, and epidemiological effects of the cemetery population throughout its history and

at different points in the life cycles of the persons buried there. Furthermore, our team's recognition of African suppliers for a Euro-American driven transatlantic trade in human captives positioned us properly to receive a senior delegation of the Ghanaian National House of Chiefs. They acknowledged regretfully the involvement of some past African leaders in this practice.

Especially during the earlier stages of the research, there were attempts to contain or reduce the project by limiting project and community input into aspects such as the memorialization plans, the interpretive center, and others. Whenever the project was burdened by apparently intractable bureaucratic procedures, the leadership returned to the pubic forum and was brought as community advisors to local, state and national legislators to make these efforts transparent to the public. Congressmen and community members were able to reiterate their support by letter and verbally to the GSA, which over time became more responsive and supportive of the project, but ongoing challenges to sustained and smooth operations still occurred at times. Although some proposed aspects of the Research Design (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993) were not funded, the integrity of the researchers' relationship to the ethical client -- the descendant community -- was maintained by standing steadfast with the community's insistence that GSA carry through with its commitments. The GSA was not allowed to disregard its obligations or promises to the black community. After its building was completed, the agency approved for funding additional aspects of the research design and engaged in interactions with the community related to memorialization, reinterment, and interpretation, among others. This project's leadership sought always to give GSA its best and honest advice.

Were this project not linked to community interests, there might have been fewer conflicts with the federal agency. On the other hand, community engagement defined much of the significance of the project that would represent descendant community empowerment. Harrington (1993) maintains that part of that empowerment was shown by the community's resolve and effective opposition to desecration by the insensitive leadership of a large federal agency. On the other hand, the project's ability to withstand and negotiate prevailed as a result of having a strong base of support in the general public and among concerned legislators. Funding, even under these conditions, was adequate for the broad scope of work, which is described in this Skeletal Biology Report and the project's two companion reports.

Finally, the project was designed to utilize a biocultural and biohistorical approach and rejected race estimation in favor of culturally salient categories of ethnic origin using DNA, craniometry, archaeological artifacts and features, as well as, the available historical record. We had no need to reinforce the concept of race through our research, especially when that concept obscures the cultural and historical identity of those who are made subject to its classification. Moreover, new molecular technologies and specialists in African mortuary data could put us on the trail of ethnic groups with discernable histories.

Over 50 physical anthropologists wrote to the GSA, generally supporting the forensic approach to racing (Cooke 1993; Epperson, 1996). Indeed, a number of these letters and comments suggested that the use of DNA, chemistry, and cultural traits such as dental modification could be of no value in determining origins. However, the backing of the descendant community that was far more interested in social and cultural history

than racial classification enabled the project to maintain its programmatic thrust despite the opinions expressed by these physical anthropologists.

The essential point here is that the questions and approaches that have driven the research of the NYABGP were produced by a public process of empowerment that involved distinct supporters and detractors. What we have been able to accomplish for present evaluation and future development has been the result of protracted struggle with those researchers who customarily have expected to control this kind of contracted study in order to create a research enterprise that is not repugnant to the American-American community. It is also a project of unusual epistemological complexity. As a result, the project has had an impact upon both the scientific community and public discussions of human rights and reparations for slavery (see La Roche and Blakey 1997; Blakey 1997; Blakey 1998; Blakey 2001). Six documentary films and frequent and lengthy textbook references to the New York African Burial Ground Project (Thomas, 1998; Pearson, 1999, and others) also suggest that the project has raised interesting issues for a broad range of people.

Multiple Data Sets

Multidisciplinary expertise was repeatedly shown to be essential in our attempts to answer the project's major questions regarding the origins, transformations, quality of life, and modes of resistance. Examining a question such as the origin of the population with different sets of data such as genetics, anthropometry, material culture, history, and chemistry was valuable.

1. Cross-validating the plausibility of findings on the part of a particular specialized method or set of data is provided in the form of complementary or conflicting

results from an alternative data set. Contracting results were at least as useful as complementary data because these would raise new questions and possibilities about interpretation or the need for methodological development. Biological data (such as molecular genetics) have often been privileged over cultural and historical data. We found genetics data, read in isolation of other information, to lead to erroneous conclusions relative to more verifiably accurate cultural and historical evidence. We do not privilege the biological data, but benefited from the discussion among the differing results that led us to mutually plausible conclusions. Metaphorically, one voice allowed the floor with impunity can easily make false representations without there being any means of evaluation or accountability. Where there are several voices in a dialogue about facts, the standards of plausibility are elevated by the accountability that the facts generated by each method have to one another. This sort of "discussion" among different data sets become a means, if not of objectivity, of raising standards of plausibility and of fostering a dialectical process by which new research directions would emerge.

2. Multidisciplinary research allows us to recognize more diverse dimensions of the individual biographies and community histories than any one discipline could allow us to "see" in the data. By assessing layers of origins data, for example, we construct the population in terms of its demography, pathology, genetics, cultural influences on burial practices, environmental exposures in teeth, religious history, and art that allow the construction of a more complexly human identity at the site. A fraction of these disciplines would have produced only a portion of these richer human qualities we worked to understand because observations are largely limited to the specialized knowledge and research tools required to make them.

3. This disciplinary breadth, inclusive of biology, culture, and history makes possible the kind of political economic analysis in which we are interested as biocultural anthropologists. The biological data are interpreted in relation to the population's social, political, and economic history. Yet some studies, such as those found in Chapter 5, will rely on evolutionary theory while remaining historical in its attempt to discover cultural origins with biological evidence. There needs to be a "tool kit" of theories for purposes of different research questions. The break with tradition here is that such an approach is not in search of a unifying theory; that physical anthropology and human evolution are not synonymous.

Diasporic Scope

The descendant community had been forceful in its insistence upon our examination of the African backgrounds for the New York population. Their idea was that these were people with a culture and history that preceded their enslavement and which continued to influence them even in captivity. We found the African and Caribbean connections important for understanding the site in many ways. We therefore engaged archaeologists, historians, and biologists with expertise and experience in research in all three areas. Similar to the value of multidisciplinary resources of the project, the diasporic scope of expertise allowed us to find meaningful evidence where narrower expertise could not have "seen" it. The use of quartz crystals as funerary objects required an African archaeological background, because Americanist archaeologists might have assigned them no meaning (see Perry 1999); the heart-shaped symbol believed to be of Akan origin and meaning (see Ansa 1995) was assumed to have a European, Christian meaning in the absence of anyone who could recognize an Akan

adinkra symbol. Thus the geographical and cultural connections to the site are enlarged by the diasporic scope of the researchers.

The previous chapter showed how bioarchaeological projects are often limited to very localized special and temporal contexts of interpretation. Were this project to have limited its scope of interpretation to New York City's history (or to the cemetery itself), the ABG would have revealed a colonial New York population understood for the immediate conditions of its member's enslavement, or less. A larger international context reveals a cultural background for captives and their descendants, an ebb and flow of migration between different environments and social conditions, shifting demographic structures related to a hemispheric economy, and the interactions of people and environments that changed over the course of the life cycle to impact their biology in multiple unhealthy ways. By understanding these African captives as people from societies of their own and who were thrust into enslavement in an alien environment, perhaps, their human experience can be more readily identified. This, at least, was the expressed goal in meetings of descendant community members that informed the Research Design. The desire to reach back and critically examine that experience is motivated by the scope of interests of an African diaspora "concept" that has traditionally included a vindicationist approach to black history that stands against Euro-centric historical apologetics.

A variety of other, specific theories (or explanations relating observations to systems that can be generalized within which they have meaningful implications for us) have been applied in explaining particular phenomena observed at the ABG. The above approaches, however, form the most general framework of our analyses. The meta-

theoretical approach described above comprises a process for generating the questions we ask, for assessing the reasons why we are asking those questions, the choices of theory with which the information is organized to answer those questions. They are also perhaps the most unique to our situation in which these approaches emerged as special opportunities to resolve problems and contradictions met with at the site. These are, nonetheless, procedures that can be generalized for bioarchaeological work in many kinds of situations, not limited to this site or to African diasporic bioarchaeology.

The three separate disciplinary reports for the ABGP modestly represent the potential for interdisciplinary integration of data. The three Sankofa Conferences that involved 24 of the project's multidisciplinary specialists (1995, 1998, and 2002), and the exchanges of ideas that have proceeded over the intervening years in a decade of research have influenced substantively most of the biological analyses of this report. Moreover, this report as well as the *History Final Report* and the forthcoming *Archaeology Final Report* are meant as the last stage prior to synthesis of these into an *Integrated Report*, which we look forward to developing in the future. That latter report is projected to be less technical and more accessible to the general public.

The *Skeletal Biology Final Report*, therefore, is one major achievement in an ongoing research program that the researchers expect to continue beyond the current contract with the GSA. It nonetheless represents the results of an exhaustive skeletal recordation on 419 human skeletons from the largest and oldest colonial archaeological population in the Americas that has been studied to date. The extensive methods of cleaning, inventorying, reconstructing, data gathering, and documentation for this and

future studies – an enormous amount of careful work of more than 100 professionals, technicians, and students – are reported in the following chapter.